

# Ernst Bloch's 'The Principle of Hope'

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ERNST BLOCH (1885-1977), the last of the major figures in the 'Western Marxist' tradition to appear in extensive English translation, propounds an atheist apocalyptic which is at the same time a Marxism set within a utopian frame. *The Principle of Hope* — his massive *chef d'oeuvre* written in exile in the United States in the 1940s, published while Bloch lived in the German Democratic Republic in the 1950s and now recently translated★ — lays claim to our attention in a whole number of diverse, but interconnected, respects. It offers an ontology of human (as well as natural) existence; a reworking of the main themes of apocalyptic theology; a distinctive, and charismatically persuasive, re-reading of Marx; an historical discussion of utopian thinking richer and more detailed than most of the standard academic treatments of the same topic; and a survey of hopeful and wish-fulfilling imagery from the most trivial of our daydreams to the highest mystical, aesthetic and philosophical conceptions of saving bliss. The influence of Bloch has been as multi-faceted as his work. An inspirational source for the German student movement of 1968, Bloch's hope-principle carries forward into the theology of Jürgen Moltmann as well as current Liberation Theology which, for its part, renews Bloch's project of synthesising apocalypse and Marx.

To summarise *The Principle of Hope* in a short space is impossible. (One might just as well try to summarise Augustine's *City of God*, a work which, like Bloch's, uses an idea of apparent simplicity to organise a discussion whose power derives not merely from its scope but from its wealth of detail.) What Bloch terms his 'encyclopaedia of hopes', three volumes and close on fourteen hundred pages long, is in effect a mirror in which he dares us not to recognize ourselves. Put

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★ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight. Three volumes. Blackwell, 1986, £120. The translation is to be welcomed no less warmly than the publisher's pricing policy is to be deplored: in Germany, where this work still has an underground and living reputation, its current paperback cost is the equivalent of £13 for a set of the three volumes. Presumably, in Blackwell's view, Bloch's work is fit only to be read by solvent scholars, by those with access to (fortunate) university libraries and by book-reviewers. Anyone who nonetheless manages to obtain a copy would do well to consult, alongside it, Wayne Hudson's helpful *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* together with Bloch's *Man on His Own* (a collection of short pieces with a striking introduction by Jürgen Moltmann of Tübingen) and/or his *A Philosophy of the Future* (the first volume of Bloch's introduction to philosophy, produced in Tübingen in the 1960s after his move to the west). In 1968, renaming Tübingen University the Ernst Bloch University was one among the radical students' demands.

otherwise, it is a work of 'speculation' in that term's literal and etymological sense. Its style is soaring, resonant and polyphonic: its final word, 'homeland', names the future goal of a non-alienated existence which each of its thematic voices summons and upon which, throughout history, our hopes converge. Bloch, according to whom theorising means 'venturing beyond', wagers the success of his own venturing upon a future in which every aspect of alienation — the alienation of subject from object, of self from other and of humankind from nature — is at last overcome. For it is from the vantage-point of such a future, and from there alone, that we can see not merely what we might become but what (ontologically) we are. Thus Bloch's discourse is future-oriented and proleptic. At the same time, however, it addresses us in the present tense: holding before us the enormous mirror of our hoping, Bloch challenges us to acknowledge ourselves as on course, already, towards the homeland which our dreaming anticipates and foretells. He reminds us, forcefully, how arduous and absolute are the conditions of our hope's satisfaction and yet how humanly inescapable, as well as urgent, the project of that satisfaction is.

### Marxism

The themes of Marxism and of apocalypse supply the twin axes of Bloch's work. At the cost of a somewhat artificial separation, I shall discuss each of them in turn.

The Western Marxist tradition, which besides Bloch includes Lukács and the 'Frankfurt School' writers (Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse together with Walter Benjamin), always combined, explosively, despairing pessimism as to the chances of an emancipatory social existence together with commitment to revolutionary transformation affirmed in the face, even, of the most overwhelming social and political odds. The ascending curve of the tradition's development coincides with the emergence of Nazism and Stalinism as the major obstacles to radical change. Bloch for his part champions what he calls 'militant optimism' and thus seemingly aligns himself with Western Marxism's more triumphalist and sanguine strain. However, the every extremism of his hoping conjures desperation as the dark ground against which the figure of his luminescent hope-principle stands out: **we learn that nothing less than the *nunc stans* of the mystics — the absolutely fulfilling moment of 'a being-here at last adequate to itself' — can satisfy our hopeful longings**, and thus in Bloch's view count as a worthwhile **radical and political aim**. Only a new heaven and a new earth, or rather a heaven nowhere else than upon this earth, can measure up to the Marxist revolutionary imperative that all things (ourselves included) be made anew. No other writer within Marxism sets the stakes in revolutionary transformation so awesomely high. Setting them thus, Bloch contends that it is in the tradition of apocalyptic thinking, according to which history culminates in a final dramatic action which is at once redemptive (in the sense of transcending alienation) and revelatory (in the sense of making history's meaning at last clear), that Marxism itself stands.

Marx's 1844 characterisation of communism as 'the riddle of history solved' and his 1859 depiction of capitalism as the last epoch in human 'prehistory' certainly bear this apocalyptic reading out. Nor does the soundness of Bloch's contention depend on isolated passages alone. **If revolution is to be, as Marx held, the coincidence of social change and human 'self-change', then much more is involved than merely an alteration in social institutions, as though the same counters were being rearranged on the same social board. Rather, our entire**

being-in-the-world (including, for example, our experiences of such fundamental ontological structures as time and space) must be placed at issue in a transformation which, if it is to count as such, opens on to what Hegel — in a passage quoted by Bloch — terms a 'new world'. For Walter Benjamin, too, in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' written in 1940, revolution entails not merely a social re-ordering but an apocalyptic deconstruction of the linear clock-time in which history — that is, the history of alienation — unfolds.

Bloch adds to this reappraisal of Marxism a novel hermeneutical principle in the light of which Marx's writings are to be understood. It is his view, that, besides a 'cold stream' of social analysis — which evaluates, instrumentally, the 'objective possibility' of successful revolutionary action — a complementary 'warm stream' within Marxism is to be discerned. This warm stream projects what he calls 'real possibility' or, in other words, our utopian aspirations towards the homeland which is Marxism's *raison d'être* and final goal. The cold and the warm streams represent, respectively the reality- and the pleasure-principles of Marxian thought; once homeland is reached (but not until then) these principles coincide. Both principles are needful. Minus the corrective of prosaic social analysis the pleasure-principle of utopia remains abstract and courts political impotence or disaster; minus the euphoric warm stream the reality-principle of instrumental calculation becomes all-encompassing, the image of homeland disappears, revolution degenerates into reformism and — this being Bloch's crucial hermeneutical insight — Marx's texts become literally unintelligible inasmuch as the conceptual lines of force which mould them can no longer be seen. 'Comprehended hope', or in other words socially and historically concrete utopia, becomes for Bloch the sign under which the warm and the cold streams of Marxism flow together and also the governing interpretive principle under which Marx himself is to be read. In Engels' view, which became an orthodoxy, Marxism is born when socialism graduates from immature 'utopia' to mature 'science'; Bloch's contrary insistence is that it is only when construed as on-course towards utopia that the scientificity of Marxism can appear. For the Engelsian transition from utopia to science, Bloch substitutes a transition from abstract (historically ungrounded) utopia to concrete utopia in which warm and cold currents of theorising intertwine. ★

### Apocalypse

Just as Marxism conjures, for Bloch, an image of apocalyptic worldly transformation so, conversely, it is for him Marxism which is apocalyptic theory's authentic and most rigorous heir. Traditionally, as for example in Augustine and Luther, Christianity has located its image of heaven in an other-worldly 'beyond' and in an 'eternity' outwith the line of mundane historical time. Thus, as Hegel remarks, the world of Christianity is one which is 'double, divided and self-opposed': its characteristic pathos is that of what he terms the 'Unhappy Consciousness' which despairs of surpassing alienation in this world and consoles itself with dreams of an other-worldly and trans-historical bliss.

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★ In *Edinburgh Review* No. 71 (November 1985) I urged that the terms 'utopia' and 'apocalypse' should be seen as systematically distinct. In order to avoid confusion it may be worth noting, here, that in the present review I follow Bloch's usage and treat the notions of utopia and apocalypse as convergent rather than as opposed. In effect (in my terms) Bloch draws the discussion of utopian literature as a whole on to apocalyptic ground.

Alongside this predominant orthodoxy, however, Christianity has recurrently projected the apocalyptic scenario of a redemption envisaged in wholly this-worldly terms and occurring at some (future) moment on the line of historical time: again to quote Hegel, within the conceptual framework of apocalypse the 'heaven' of the Unhappy Consciousness is 'transplanted to earth below'. Not infrequently, the scenario of apocalyptic transformation — the worldly arrival of the Kingdom and the making of all things anew — has been the vehicle of social and political radicalism: examples are the Hussite revolution in Bohemia in the fifteenth century, the German peasant wars at the time of the Reformation and the seventeenth century English Revolution. (Conversely, as proposed earlier, it is on the idea of apocalyptic transformation that the notion of revolution itself depends.)

It is in this tradition of radical or 'left' apocalypse that Bloch himself stands. The Blochian homeland lies, not elsewhere in space (like the utopias of Thomas More or Campanella or Bacon), nor as for Augustine and Luther in a 'hereafter' disconnected from worldly and historical existence, but in a future towards which not only human but even perhaps natural being always-already aims. All of Bloch's central categories — for example, 'venturing beyond', the 'utopian function' and the 'not-yet' — are indeed future-oriented in a deeply wishful sense. We have seen already how in his view it is the mystics (no less) who foretell revolution's goal. Once this goal has been reached, we learn, nature ceases to be an inert object of instrumental manipulation and becomes, instead, a 'possible subject' with which a human 'technology without violation' can ally itself. (Here, Green and ecological politics find themselves amongst Bloch's apocalyptic heirs.) Nothing in the redemptive charge of Christianity is lessened, but the envisaged redemption goes forward in wholly mundane and worldly terms.

Within Christianity, apocalyptic has always stood close to heresy. Bloch, for his part, presses heresy to the point where literal atheism is entailed: 'Without atheism', he states 'messianism has no place'. This is so because any image of an other-worldly beyond can only delimit our freedom and alienate us from what, as human, we might yet become. As Bloch has it, 'Where the great world-ruler is, freedom has no space'. Bloch styles his thinking 'meta-religious', meaning by this that his atheism is at the opposite remove from complacent and prosaic rejection of religiously-formulated goals and hopes. What Augustine (for example) places in a heavenly city and there alone, Bloch sites at the end of the history of travail and alienation which is our own. The same hopes stand; only, their other-worldly sign is reversed. The path to redemption lies through revolution, but precisely redemption remains revolution's goal. Thus, apocalyptic atheism dovetails with Marxism, and entails the latter since it is Marx who gives concrete social and historical substance to religion's dreams.

### Ontology

A final expository step is needful to make Bloch's challenge to us clear, since it is not only to readers who count themselves as Marxists or apocalypticists that *The Principle of Hope* is addressed. As remarked earlier, Bloch offers an ontology of human existence: this ontology can be summarised by saying that, for him, we *are already*, as human, what we *are not-yet*. What Bloch means by this (and it is an insistence that he shares with, amongst others, Hegel and Marx) is that we exist 'ecstatically' in the literal sense of standing out ahead of ourselves towards an

open future which we ourselves actively determine and towards which our hoping is addressed. (If nature is a 'possible subject' this means that, in Bloch's view, it too exists as what it is not-yet). In sum, for Bloch, we freely determine ourselves in and through our actions and so are not merely — as for 'vulgar Marxism' — deterministic products of our past.

All this being so, it follows that (as Bloch stresses) our possibilities are as ontologically real as what, at any present moment, we find ourselves to be. Bloch's phrase, 'real possibility', is intended to underscore just this point. We exist as the possibility of becoming something irreducibly and fundamentally new, and ecstatic 'venturing beyond' is just that in which, as human, we consist. The ecstasy of our hoping is accordingly the ecstasy which we are, and what we are is nothing other than the principle of hope itself. Bloch expresses this by saying that a 'utopian function' — a forward-dawning projection of ourselves towards a self-chosen and hoped-for future — is intrinsic to our psychical and indeed to our ontological economy. In short, as human, *we are already on course towards the utopia of homeland* although, as he concedes, nothing guarantees that our utopian venturing (and thus our human status) may not, just because they are self-chosen, go awry. Our possibilities are our utopias; these possibilities are what we are; hence, in the present, we exist always-already as utopians who seek in one way or another to wrestle with the challenge of our dreams.

Two consequences follow from the ontology of human existence which Bloch presents. One is that his 'encyclopaedia of hopes', in its entirety, is the carrying out in a detailed and concrete way of the project of ontological description which the notion of not-yet-existing sketches in general and abstract terms: if we exist ecstatically, then we can learn what we are only by surveying what we yet hope to be. It is in this sense that, as remarked earlier, Bloch holds before us a panoramic mirror and calls upon us to recognize ourselves in the totality of what we there see.

The second consequence is that, if what we see in the mirror of Blochian speculation is indeed hope articulated as Marxism and as apocalyptic redemption, then Bloch challenges us precisely *as human* and not merely as readers who share a prior commitment to the idea of revolutionary change. To recognize ourselves in the galaxy of Bloch's hopeful imagery is to recognize ourselves as *not-yet* citizens of our homeland and thus, in the present, as *already embarked* (if only in our daydreams) on that venturing-beyond which the motif of apocalypse summarises and connotes. Bloch avoids the relativism inherent in justifying revolution only to revolutionaries by daring us to dispute, in the face of the enormous utopian heritage which he sets before us, that to exist as human is to exist in revolutionary (ecstatic and hopeful) terms. Blochian utopia becomes humanly concrete inasmuch as his ontology of human existence, itself, goes forward in a utopian mode. To be human is to set ourselves the goal of apocalyptic self-transformation; to be thus transformed is to be no more than what, in the present, we not-yet-already are. Bloch's proleptic wager on a redemptive future is, thus, not a wager peculiar to his own discourse but rather one which we ourselves, in our actions no less than in our dreaming, already make. And so his future-oriented summons can be understood as calling forth, from us, a present — because already utopian — response.

### Principles of hope

No comprehensive evaluation of Bloch's enterprise can be undertaken here. Its rich cultural and historical detail must needs be set to one side (although I would recommend, especially, chapters 36, 37, 39 and 53 to anyone interested in the history of utopian and/or religious thought, and chapter 19 to a prospective reader of Marx). Nor is it possible to evaluate in a short space its most dubious and at the same time its most challenging thesis, namely the conception (developed most extensively in chapter 37) of nature as a 'possible subject' or — in Spinoza's terminology, which Bloch invokes — as not merely *natura naturata* but also *natura naturans*. On this score, I would refer the reader to Habermas's discussion, in his *Toward a Rational Society*, of a similar thesis which he holds to be implicit in Marcuse. Finally, I can make no attempt to assess Moltmann's project, in his *God in Creation*,<sup>★</sup> of steering Bloch's atheist apocalyptic back on to more orthodox theistic and Christian rails. According to Moltmann, if religion is the forecourt of apocalypse then it must form the main edifice as well; only a Kingdom which is not wholly this-worldly can preserve the openness towards world and future which is celebrated in Bloch's own ontology of venturing beyond. Whether a reversion to theism can sustain openness may be doubted, since, as Bloch would be the first to indicate, any deity whatever must in the end figure as a closure and as an obstacle on self-determination's path; and, if this is so, then it is in the forecourt of apocalypse and there alone that theism belongs. However, to argue this raises questions which would have to be debated (lengthily) in their own right.

In place of a discussion of these issues I shall confine myself to what, in the section on 'ontology', emerged as *The Principle of Hope's* central claim. Do we recognize ourselves in the mirror which Bloch holds? The sheer beauty and charisma of his writing together with the logical elegance of his argument (which I have attempted to summarise) make dissent no easy matter but, nonetheless, difficulties remain. These attach principally to his conception of hope itself. Conceding to Bloch that we exist as hopeful, we can suspect that — precisely *as* hopeful — we remain divided within and thereby against ourselves. Not hope as such, but rather the notion of a *unitary* hope-principle, threatens to blur distinctions which Bloch's own notion of 'comprehended hope' requires us to draw.

A first indication of this is the way in which conceptions of hope have appeared in the history of philosophical and religious thought. Sometimes hope has been presented in an instrumentalist guise signalling the ascendancy of (in Freud's sense) a reality-principle, as when Hobbes defines hope as 'appetite, with an expectation of attaining'. On the other hand, hope has also been presented as turning on a pleasure-principle in full bitter-sweet consciousness of its fragility, as in Walter Benjamin's remark (quote by Marcuse) that it is 'for the sake of those without hope' that hope in the first instance appears. The common phrase, 'hoping against hope' — a phrase which Bloch himself employs — draws out the same paradox, namely, the paradox of setting instrumental computation aside while yet wishing (hoping?) that the instruments of satisfaction lie to hand. The hope which we *hope against* is hope premised on a Hobbesian and instrumentally calculated 'expectation of attaining': we set this latter hope aside not, of course, because we do not wish to attain but because it is from no such an expectation that

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★ Based on his Gifford Lectures delivered in Edinburgh in 1984-5.

either the pathos or the legitimation of hoping is derived. In the New Testament, and again in Augustine, the same non-instrumental point is made by linking hope to faith: faith requires hope, since otherwise it would amount merely to value-neutral opinion or instrumentally entitled belief, but if it is hope which rescues faith *from this instrumentalism* then the hope concerned cannot for its part be made intelligible, without remainder, in instrumentalist terms. So to say, hope (*qua* paradoxical) overshoots itself into the vulnerable pleasure-principle of faith although, of course, the faith in question need have no other-worldly reference, and least of all an other-worldly guarantee, but may instead aim towards just such a this-worldly redemptive future as Blochian speculation ardently invokes. To be sure, paradoxical hope is drawn on to the terrain of instrumental hope insofar as it wishes to attain its object — in Bloch's terms, the 'real possibility' *which we are* summons forth issues of 'objective [or instrumental] possibility' — but the former must be acknowledged as irreducible to the latter since, if hope consisted solely in expectation, then it would amount simply to desire or intention and in the end no longer to hope at all.

It might seem as though, this said, the notion of a unitary hope-principle could still be sustained. For to contend that one thing is irreducible to another is not at all to imply that, between them, a contradictory or antagonistic relation obtains. An antagonistic relation does obtain between paradoxical and instrumental hope, however, simply because instrumental computation, once embarked upon, discovers no limitation within itself to the areas where it may be validly applied. Put otherside: its project is hegemonic from the start, and no pleasure-principle — least of all, those of faith and of hope-as-paradox — can place obstacles in the way of its demythologising advance. Just this is the theme of Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the work (like Bloch's, a product of the Nazi exile) in which the darker and more troubled stratum in Western Marxism is articulated in paradigmatic form. Conversely, as Freud and, later, Marcuse emphasise, the pleasure-principle which projects homeland anathematizes instrumental postponement and remains present — repressed, oppositional and (in a word) paradoxical — even when required to petition for its entitlement on an instrumentalist terrain. In this way, unitary hope becomes internally contradictory and complex despite the circumstance that hope-as-expectation requires hope-as-paradox (if it is to remain hope) while hope-as-paradox requires hope-as-expectation insofar as it is really (which means, instrumentally) serious about what it wants.

What this amounts to is an acknowledgement that, not merely in Marxist theorising but in the world, the 'warm stream' of utopian ecstasy and the 'cold stream' of instrumental analysis — respectively, the pleasure-principle and the reality-principle of revolutionary change — totalise less easily than Bloch claims to think. Leaving aside the question of whether, as Bloch maintains, they become coincident in the homeland of 'a being-here at last adequate to itself', what is clear enough is that they remain distinct in a world which is by no means self-evidently on course towards its redemption. In such a world, the internal contradiction within the hope-principle becomes a political contradiction as well. One of the central points in the critique of instrumental reasoning presented by Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse is that to think instrumentally in a not-yet-emancipated society is to accept that society's own categories and terms: political 'success' requires the following of extant social rules, in the same way as the 'successful'

construction of a technical artifact is possible only by doing what the relevant instructional-manual says. The point is not merely that, in capitalist society, instrumental reason is in the ascendant but that an instrumental political orientation *per se* serves only to underscore that status quo. To be sure, a non-emancipated society is not (as the Frankfurt School writers seem sometimes to imply) a seamless whole of estrangement and repression. Within it, as Marx emphasises, contradictions obtain. But nonetheless revolutionary change remains always and necessarily, a project undertaken against the social odds simply because those odds are, themselves, socially constructed in such a way as to minimise the chances of transformational change. Vulgar-Marxist triumphalism — the conviction, always of course 'scientifically' sustained, that history is on revolution's side — stands, on this score, at the opposite extreme from the theory of ideology articulated by Marx himself. This being so, it follows that Marxism's 'cold stream', which instrumentally weighs revolution's chances, becomes a political tool with more than a single (a revolutionary) use. To think instrumentally is to think not against the odds but with them, and to think and act with the odds is to do battle on territory where the enemy is, by definition, strong. And, of course, the most that a given set of socially-constructed odds entitle is reformism. Whereas ecstasy projects nothing short of homeland — and its sheerly absolute and uncompromising character makes its non-instrumental status clear — the thrust of analysis under the sign of any reality-principle whatever is to lower the political stakes far below the threshold of redemption to the point where, within a pre-given social space, merely a rearrangement of institutions forms the order of the political day. In sum, and paradoxically: it is optimism which undermines hopefulness while the united front with instrumentalism which ecstasy certainly (on pain of abstraction and political impotence) requires is one shot through with readiness to throw all balancing of probabilities to the winds. To be sure, the *kairos* of this dismissal has co-ordinates which analysis no less than ecstasy must bring to light. The light, however, is that of ecstasy and the united front of the hope-principle's warm and cold currents is no unproblematic solidarity but rather an alliance whose terms must needs be renegotiated at each venturing, and necessarily uncertain, step.

Thus, in ways which I have indicated, Bloch's unitary hope-principle deconstructs into a complex field of theoretical and practical tendencies which are internally related but from which reciprocal antagonism can never (at least, this side of homeland) be excised. What we recognize in the Blochian mirror are beings more in unity with themselves and more harmonious than we find ourselves to be. Bloch knows this, at least in the sense that he is willing to place the stakes of hope's satisfaction so absolutely high: it is not the reality-principle but the pleasure-principle which declares that, in homeland, these two principles may at last coincide. At the level of first-order 'theory', Bloch urges that the warm and cold dimensions of hoping complement one another directly; at the level of his second-order 'metatheory' it is the warm stream, solely, which dictates the alliance's terms. In the space which thus opens between theory and metatheory, darkness becomes apparent and it is against this darkness that the blazing galaxy of Bloch's redemptive imagery stands out. Thus, it is only seemingly that *The Principle of Hope* endorses unequivocally optimistic views. Minus theological guarantees and minus instrumentalist complacency — that is, precisely, as the author of an atheist apocalypse and a utopian Marxism — Bloch offers us paradox

rather than triumphalism. If we fail to recognize ourselves within his speculation this is because, as not-yet-existing, we are nothing (no thing) which can be seen and acknowledged once and for all. Within the frame of paradox the mirror-imagery alters and what Bloch shows to us — without ever saying it — is the contradiction which hopefulness entitles and which, ecstatically, we ourselves presently are.